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## Crucial Bread

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Crucial Bread

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing

by

Laura Miller

B.A. University of Southern Mississippi, 2002

May 2008

## **Acknowledgements**

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I am further grateful to my UNO classmates for their invaluable eyes and ears, and for inspiring me with their own writing and ideas. And to D.C. Berry, who first showed me how poetry comes alive.

Dedicated to M, with love.

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## Crucial Bread: An Introduction

In my writing, making a poem nearly always starts with a single phrase that has come to me, one I'm fond of because it *sounds* good, or because it strikes me as a suitable way to articulate an idea. If both the cadence of the language pleases me and the idea behind the phrase seems pertinent, it will quickly prompt a poem. I think of these bits as "snippets," or "odds and ends" and I have a lot of them, some of which have found a home in a poem (or other piece of writing), some of which have not. After the snippets appear, I often get stuck for a while, hindered by an inability to decide what to do with them. Sometimes, the snippets remain lonely because I can't figure out how to expand them into a poem or arrange them with other snippets. (Hence, I have hundreds of unfinished poems. I find poems easy to start, but difficult to finish. I have a lot of snippets waiting for a poem to invite them home. "The Footman's Endeavor," in a persona very different from my own, addresses this idea of free-floating phrases looking for like phrases with which to bond.)

Snippets may be ordinary or strange, literal or figurative, but alone, they are merely snippets and not my own creation yet. Putting snippets together in my own grouping gives me ownership. There's such joy in that, and it motivates me to write poems and come up with new snippets.

Once the motivation to write a poem shows up, the music and rhythm often drive me forward out of a desire to experiment with words and their sound effects. Until recently, this process rarely began as a conscious choice to use a certain foot, meter, or rhyme scheme. I simply listened for the sound patterns suggesting themselves to me as I moved forward. While I still compose mostly in free verse, lately I've worked more with poetic forms, thanks to the workshops I've taken with Kay Murphy. Several poems that began in a form are included in this

collection, but once the poems began to flesh themselves out, I often allowed myself to deviate from the form. Following forms to this degree allows the power inherent in a poetic form (such as musicality) to inform the final version, but not to dictate its development. For example, “Going Home from the Vineyard Party with Bukowski” began as a *paradelle* (a form Billy Collins invented) and “I’ll Sing of Mississippi to My Daughters” began as a *decima*. “The Footman’s Daughter” has fourteen lines like a sonnet, with a turn in the final two lines, but does not rhyme in a regular pattern. “Villanelle After a Setback” is pretty close to a true villanelle, but in lieu of perfect rhyme I use slant rhyme. This technique enables me to utilize the strengths of forms without being bound by their restrictions.

Following a similar rationale, and in the interest of avoiding predictability, I often use internal and slant rhymes. After all, few perfect rhymes exist in the English language to begin with, and most, if not all, have been used up. This goes back to allowing musicality to guide my choices but making sure that auditory surprises remain. My musical concerns in composition resemble the rationale of jazz, not the pop lyric.

Along with paying attention to the rhythm, rhyme, and imagery (I try to use a “thing per line,” as my former teacher DC Berry advocates), I tend to focus on the message or meaning early in the composing process. Meaning may stem from the desire to articulate an emotion (“Last Night’s Drunk Love Letters”), to describe interesting imagery (“What Lies Between Us”), to share an insight (“The Heart is Not a Lamp”), to make a comparison (“Poetry, Please Come to Dinner”) or to tell a story (“Crucial Bread”). Meaning matters a lot; even when I don’t know what I’m trying to convey at first, I figure it out in order to move forward. As Berry also says, every poem needs a “so-what.” (In other words, “I wrote a poem” may be met with “So what?” The poet needs to know what insights she wants the reader to consider.) I strive to write

accessible poems that are complex enough to provoke thought, but not so difficult that they confound the average reader.

I dislike and am discouraged by poems that seem difficult for difficulty's sake and I often suspect the poet of trying to sound "deep" at the expense of lucidity. I do not want a poem to be "dumbed down"; I advocate a meaning that is complex enough to challenge the reader, and that utilizes nuances in language. This nuanced quality that allows for several layers of meaning in language delights me; poems that seem intentionally abstruse frustrate me and make me question the poet's intentions. I sometimes suspect that a lot of poets are working with inscrutability and calling it profundity.

I take more of a populist approach. Abstruse poems bother me because I believe they exclude all those but the academically elite—a rather small margin of people, really. This trend is out of keeping with poetry's roots as a bodily (vocal) mechanism that spoke to the people. Poems should be democratic, addressing human concerns, but abstruse poems prohibit many readers from comprehending the ideas presented and from being able to join the discussion that poetry can precipitate. Sometimes it seems the poets themselves can't even answer their own so-what. This seems elitist and wrong-headed to me, and just as bad as a poem that is overly simplistic. In my title, "bread" stands for this direct, for-the-masses approach, and "crucial" for the exquisite quality of language that makes it poetry. I touch on this idea, tongue firmly in cheek, in the opening poem, "Poetry, Please Come to Dinner," when the speaker appeals to the muse to send water crackers, but concedes that she'll accept a Ritz.

I've been told I write in a light tone, and hearing it, I almost felt guilty. (I defend my license to play, however. Musicians *play* music. Why not poets?) While I've never consciously

chosen this effect, I aim for liveliness, energy, and wittiness, mostly because it is enjoyable to write and read. A poem should express an insight, and should not, generally speaking, veer into silliness, but I think poetry has a reputation for being stuffy because of a lack of playfulness in some acclaimed poems. So I strive to temper playfulness with a certain psychic weight. I remember when I first read “The Pope’s Penis” by Sharon Olds; I was an undergraduate student and not yet widely read in contemporary poetry. I remember thinking, “We’re allowed to be irreverent? Great!”

Still, many of the world’s finest poems explore the dark side of human nature, and poetry has an introspective quality that makes it an ideal medium for this. Poems that treat our shadow side intrigue me, and I have the utmost admiration and appreciation of poets who eloquently present depression, dismay, and heaviness; in fact, we *need* poets to give us profound words to describe this universally unavoidable aspect of our existence. Edgar Allan Poe states this idea beautifully in “The Philosophy of Composition,” writing that the highest form of beauty (which is the poet’s aim) is melancholy beauty. This is also what Lorca refers to as “*duende*,” or dark matter. Poe claims that a writer should aim for beauty in its “highest manifestation—and all experience has shown that this tone is one of *sadness*. Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears” (1600).

Poe is saying that poignancy can only be achieved through stimulating sadness—an introspective emotion, as poignancy is an introspective effect—and thus, truly does speak to a deeper part of our psyches. So, I like “sad beauty” too. I just don’t think that it’s my forte, unless it’s combined with playfulness. Contemplation and amusement are not mutually exclusive effects. I think, like “The Pope’s Penis,” my poem about Marilyn Monroe achieves this



combination; the voice and its message are very dark, but there are jokes and plenty of wordplay as well. Cultivating juxtapositions of this nature can strengthen the emotional effect by contrast.

Other poets who have influenced me in this vein include Frank O'Hara, for his breezy voice, and Plath for her musicality—the downright delightful rhymes juxtaposed with troubling subject matter. I also like Beat poets like Corso and Ginsberg who loosen restrictive verse expectations and feel free to incorporate aspects of pop culture in their poems, making them things that seem to live and breathe in the real world.

While I have received some criticism for my own use of pop culture references, I don't live in the world of Persephone or Solomon. I live in the world of the Dave Mathews Band, as O'Hara lived in the world of Lana Turner. I don't see much difference between classical allusions and pop culture references other than the fact that more people today recognize the latter. I think there are advantages to drawing on these shared references, and I'm not afraid to date myself. If, years from now, people don't recognize the references, they can always look them up the way that we today can look up a classical allusion. Too, because I often perform my poems, the audience needs to "get it" the first time. Furthermore, I admire those artists, such as, say, the pop star Madonna—not for her lyrics, mind you—who put a finger to the pulse of contemporary society. After all, this is where we all live at all times—in the now. Yet, a lot of poets often seem to be mired in the past, which is a shame, especially as people who read, write, and appreciate poetry seem to be dwindling.

Still, I see the wisdom in the warning to use pop culture sparingly, if at all, and I try to use only the ones that have large and multi-dimensional implications; my references to cultural phenomenon like ADD and MTV, for example, attempt to speak of the times in which we live, and not the phenomena themselves. My poem about Marilyn Monroe, who embodies the

Cinderella story but whose personal pain testifies against it, who is widely recognized as a voluptuous sex symbol, but also as the ultimate little-girl-lost figure, treats these contradictions—her divine faults—as its subject matter, not the actress herself. There are a whole set of associations, I realize, that people will bring to a poem about a pop culture figure, but sometimes those associations can even work in the poet’s favor. (“Marilyn’s hair *did* look like whipped butter.”)

Furthermore, as a performance poet, one who writes for the stage as much as for the page, I ask myself the question: is it better, in a live setting, to reference an ancient god or a widely recognized and highly specific entity, such as Amoco? The answer is that it depends, of course. I understand the thinking behind those poets who’d go for the god, and scoff at a poem that reference Red Bull or Dwight Yoakam, but when performing, I can’t wait for listeners to have a chance to look up references that they don’t already know, and making use of shared cultural reference points in this way tends to foster a democratic spirit at a reading.

Because I often write poems that I intend to perform, because I like to be accessible, and because the music comes to life when *heard*, when I write, and especially when I revise and rehearse with a mind to *perform* a poem, I try to picture an audience of actual people. Would Danny smile after reading this line? Would this line embarrass my mother? Would it thrill my friend Amy? What would Marc Smith (founder of slam poetry competitions) think? How about Walt Whitman? Maybe my goal is to speak to the masses, partially because I confess I enjoy an audience. I confess I’d rather be Billy Collins (a true champion of the light tone), less respected by the academy but better understood by the masses, than Marianne Moore or Ezra Pound. While I appreciate the validity in members of an esoteric audience addressing each other, I believe that

the best artists speak to both the masses and the small group—Bob Dylan, Tennessee Williams, Shakespeare—and if I had to choose just one, I’d most likely take the masses.

Many times in my graduate poetry workshops, I’ve received comments from my classmates such as, “I’m not sure what I think of this. I need to hear you read it.” Many spoken word artists’ performing skills outweigh their writing skills, and at times, I think I fall into that category, although I try to write for the page as well. I chose to omit many poems from this manuscript because I feel they are not as strong on the page. My most successful poems, however, work both ways. (I am thinking of poems like “Poetry, Please Come to Dinner,” the Marilyn poem, “Crucial Bread,” and “It Was Cool. It Was Enough.”)

The role of repetition in the oral art form, along with considerations concerning accessibility (will the listeners comprehend my poem hearing it only once?), are two of the main differences between poetic songs and page poetry, differences I’ve grappled with defining. While the human voice and body can do a lot of work to convey emotion, the reader’s ability to contemplate the lyrics’ nuances at leisure usually make the page poem a stronger, and justifiably more respected, piece of writing. After all, the page is the only place that allows the reader to go back and savor certain lines.

Another advantage of the page for me: I love the *look* of words on a page of poetry. This is strength of the page cannot be undervalued (for example, the way a line break can convey alternate readings) and I get a lot of enjoyment playing with line breaks when I write poems. Visual aspects of a poem on the page, such as the enjambment in “Poetry, Please Come to Dinner,” the zig-zagging lines of “It Was Cool. It Was Enough.” and the couplets of “Two of Cups” are lost to a live audience that only hears, but doesn’t see, the work.

At times, though, a performance piece has the advantage. For example, the chorus of “Last Night’s Drunk Love Letters.” When I perform this piece, I speak the verses and sing the chorus, slowing the latter down and making it stand out. When sung in my Southern accent, “ocean” rhymes with “going,” and “whoosh,” when combined with sweeping hand gestures, mimic the ocean surf and the meaning of the poem. This same chorus, by comparison, lies rather flat on the page.

Some themes running throughout this collection include writing, gender, vice, fairy tales, coming of age and love. In other words, these are a rather mixed bag of poems. Originally, I intended to compile a collection of poems inspired by Tarot cards, a resource I’ve been using recently to inspire my writing. The ghost of that since-vanquished approach remains in hints—“Personally” is based on The Hermit card; “Two of Cups” takes its title from the card that stands for romantic partnerships; “The Devil” refers to the part of our personalities that gets enslaved by addiction and vice; most of the love poems involve water, symbol of emotions in Tarot; and the Wheel of Fortune card and its suggestions of turning points informs “It Was Cool. It Was Enough.”

With the idea of a Tarot-themed collection abandoned, I struggled with the order and the unifying theme of this collection for quite some time. Since no single theme unites the poems herein, I have tried to organize the collection to show variety in style, especially in the early poems, and to follow a *natural* (read: unforced) progression from poem to poem, to order the poems in the way that the Japanese linked-verse form called *renga* is a progression; I’ve heard it explained as the “springboard” technique, where each link connects to the previous link, but not necessarily to the one just before that.

The title of the collection that I have decided on comes from one of my favorite poems in this collection, and one that typifies much of the work I've done in my twenties, which deals with young women, vice, and the move from girlhood to womanhood with its accompanying demands, temptations, and struggles. I see "Crucial Bread" as that which is basic and plain, but also urgent, a combination of basic, no-frills sustenance with extreme excitement. Jane, the girl in the title poem, is experiencing both the rush of young love and the rush of defying her father. To a teenager in love (or lust), this scenario will make her feel as though she's discovered something utterly new to the world. To anyone who has been a teenager already, her feelings are simply basic and expected parts of adolescence. "Poetry, Please Come to Dinner" treats this idea loosely and playfully, the speaker appealing to the muse to bring her a more elevated form of bread in the water cracker, but admitting that she'll also accept a Ritz. I think poetry is sort of like that. The poet works with letters, words, phrases, and snippets to communicate basic ideas—bread. And I want to write poems that are food for thought for those who'd prefer a Ritz as well as those who'd prefer a water cracker. Yet, I want the food to feel crucial, and poetry infuses language with a sense of urgency through its music, meaning, and other effects, where the newness of the particular combinations of words makes each phrase new and exciting. "Crucial Bread," as it relates to my personal poetics, very much resembles what Dr. Berry—who was full of quotable maxims like this—calls poetry: "memorable talk."

## Works Cited

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Philosophy of Composition." The Norton Anthology of American Literature. Ed. Nina Baym. Sixth Edition. New York: Norton and Company, 2003. 1597-1605.

## Poetry, Please Come to Dinner

Share a martini with me darling,  
perhaps a famished kiss. Let us speak  
to each other in parentheses, sip

insinuations, sup on nouns and clauses.  
Let verbs—*pour, scribble, flirt, sizzle, pop, backspace, dip*—slip  
whole and raw into the verses. Then, let's eat

each other's phrases like pears in silver  
cups. Let us tie the stems of our  
sentences up in knots and speaking of

tongues, let us speak in them. Tonight  
we should write a hymn. Hey  
Poetry, put a pat of butter in

my mouth. I'm ready to write  
a love song that catches sounds  
like light in jelly jars;

feed me those lines like caviar  
on a water cracker. If you're in  
a cold soup mood, at least a Ritz.

If you fill my mind  
with victuals, I will offer  
you libations. I'll disguise your lapses

in marketability if you disguise mine,  
and sweetheart,  
tongues will hit and tongues will miss.

## **Crucial Bread**



## Affirmations

While you and I enjoy a cool swim, dear,  
a Siberian shaman steps lithely as a jaguar across hot coals.  
A woman in Montana stares at a wok-shaped moon, rubs her belly, expecting  
a girl she'll call *China*.  
A gardener builds up manna with her palms deep in warm, damp, dirt,  
as a jogger on a runner's high sees the flowers on the sidewalk:  
tiny yellow velvet trumpets. His Irish setter trots, approving everything.

While you and I borrow trouble but don't return it,  
an athlete cups his palm under a faucet, makes a pool of water for looking. His wife waters  
pink roses.  
A housecat hears the can opener and cries out for his own scoop of tuna.  
A professor blooms in an oxygen-rich study.  
A Greek doctor flips and dips, sharking around in the Dead Sea,  
as an empath meditates her deep blue soul into a wolf's deep blue soul.

While you and I shiver in our sleep,  
a captain with wind-chapped cheeks steps from his ship to the triumphant crunch of boots  
on a crust of snow.  
A husband hurls primary-colored paint.  
A waitress perfects Downward Facing Dog.  
An Israeli girl discovers the symbolism in the moon, assonance in rushing  
waters, hope in the new leaf: all the floating stuff of poetry.

While you and I argue, tussling out our winter moods,  
heliotropes in Kenya turn to the sun.  
Morning birds sing to conjure the dawn,  
as a Vietnamese fisherman lets a cold conversation slip down the drain of a hot shower.

While you and I paint the bathroom buttercream, dear,  
let's remember Edison failed to make a light bulb 25,000 times.  
An ice skater in Yugoslavia dips her fingers in holy water and forgives her father.  
A boy in Michigan fills a breadbasket with lake rocks. The one he rubs is a dark gray potato,  
a lump of coal lightened. The one he keeps in his pocket has the skin of a leopard.

## **I'll Sing Mississippi to My Daughters**

Let a little ray of light braid  
my long blue hair in clear waters.  
Let the Delta sing my daughters,  
roll them in sunflowers, homemade

patchwork quilts Little Mimmaw gave  
so the farm could feed my mother,  
aunts and uncles, sisters, brothers.  
Mimmaw snapped beans, shelled purple hulls,  
plowed flat fields, made jelly from plums,  
paced the porch when Papaw got drunk.  
From the pounds of cotton Mimmaw carried,  
she lost twelve babies, each buried  
in the land our pecan trees cover.

Let a little ray of light braid  
my long blue hair in clear waters.  
Let the Delta sing my daughters,  
roll them in sunflowers, homemade.

## Crucial Bread

The ripe, Iowa sky stretched a clear dome  
of black-stained air above the farm.

The moon cast mellow on the clapboard  
house, the red barn, the pear trees,  
the geese's pond, neat row after  
neat row of planted corn. It was  
nearly midnight, but who cared?  
The farmer's youngest daughter knew  
that Mike would wait for her in the fields.

The farmer's lungs wheezed dustbowl accordion,  
*chug-shoo-chug* in the machinery of dreams.  
Daddy's pumpkin tiptoed to the light of her father's door.  
"Dad, I'm home on time," she whispered.

What he mumbled may have been

*Goodnight, Janie.*

Maybe he called her by the name of one of his older daughters:

*Claire or Katie or Marie.*

Jane shut his door,  
breathing as softly as a baby,  
waiting  
for snores  
to waltz  
her old man  
down again.

Then, her hands and feet fell quietly as cats' paws  
as out her bedroom window  
the farmer's daughter deftly crawled.

Mike stood in the flowerbed in his big black boots,  
crushing the farmer's scarlet impatiens  
(touch-me-nots, their *nom-de-plume*).  
He helped her climb down onto damp, black ground.

Proposing a playful race, Jane ran. Mike chased  
after her wheat-colored hair blowing in the wind.  
When she beat him to his truck, he grinned.

His brown eyes seemed on fire to her, in the flying dust,  
as his pickup merged  
onto the open road  
and her fresh-fed, shining laughter pealed out  
like ripped silk.

The farmer slept,  
soon to turn into a ghost again.

## **The Devil**

Wearing our habits,  
we ride our fine white horses  
into Babylon.

## **Dottie**

Dottie craves the witch's poppy field  
to feed her taste for the surreal.  
Her lion act is a charade.

Her feelings crushed in flowerbeds,  
without a place to lay her head,  
she stuffs her soul with straw and hay.

With just a mutt, stolen red shoes,  
a basketful of homesick blues,  
she seeks a wizard who can cure

(with smoke and mirrors and strong  
arms that keep young Dottie strung along)  
the deficits that she endures.

Dottie's body lacks these vital parts:  
the brains, a home, the guts, the heart.  
She wanders down a winding road.  
It's paved with bricks. It shines like gold.

## Advice Marilyn Monroe's Mother May Have Given Her

Do it, girl.  
Show them show-time  
boys who's best. Smile. Stand  
up straight. Play the flake. Bet your  
living on your figure. If the body is  
a temple, then there are people  
meant to enter. On calendars,  
work curves. Breasts say  
it best. Pendulum ass,  
hourglass, white  
thighs, tender-  
sized: these  
things are divine. A  
line'll come down your  
chest like a fault. Make them  
think of you the pink of you,  
ceilingstaring into space. Make  
them ache to see the icon of  
your image, the soft vanilla  
vision of America on your face.  
Madden them, child, madden  
them good. Make a killing  
with your great golden  
cleavage and your  
whipped butter  
hair. Blow kisses  
to cameras  
in the air  
just puck-  
er lippy  
perfect.  
Shimmer,  
bitch,  
remem-  
ber:  
god's a Man.

## Going Home from the Vineyard Party with Bukowski

Dissatisfaction sex realizes bathwater.  
Stockings, drunk cat boots crumpled  
on tile, the woman weeps drunk bathwater.

Broken window, silk towel, cigarettes  
touching much worse. Listening heels:  
the bastard is dressed. Worse, the dressed

window cigarettes much. Naked woman  
weeping cigarettes. Juice thought  
bread. He's hard kitchen. She's cold bed.

The words in the kitchen: terrible. The bastard's  
dressed terrible. His pockets house  
intellectual horrible hands.

Sighing, the woman pockets bread.  
Terrible. The window's unblinking,  
the sex bed realizes worse.



## Modern Pharmacology

The analyst is of the era of Dianes and Sharons,  
a robin with eggs for eyes, cool behind her reading  
glasses. A tank of glass. "Do you prefer  
pencil or pen?" she asks.  
I answer correctly: *yes*.

She sticks a yellow # 5 behind her ear.  
I change my answer to *computer*  
*screen*. She asks me to elaborate on that.  
I prefer tattoo when it rains, I add.

"Moving on," she says. She clears  
her throat. "Jennifer, your signature  
registers static: an unstable J, an inattentive F."  
Doctor, what does this mean? I gasp.

Not one among us here has not practiced  
her autograph. I proclaim that MTV  
tainted my brain, ADD  
is not to blame and no such thing.

I call her keymaster to my soul  
but she knows I don't mean that. She pushes  
a prescription at me from across her desk.  
Your autograph looks like Legos, I protest.  
What about the backaches I came to you about?

"Your meds take care of all of that. Swallow it down like everyone else."

You forgot to read  
my mother memories! I shout. "Get out,"  
she says, "Get. Out."

## It Was Cool. It Was Enough.

A carnie called Apollo controls the lever.  
And seeing how he's the god of order, it's kind of surprising that the starts  
and stops are so jarring,  
that the ferris wheel ride's too short and too slow altogether.

But don't get me wrong.  
I love that I am actually writing.  
I love Apollo's usurping the lever.  
I love God's saving grace shining down on me—  
Just one complaint:

All we had to do was find Nathaniel,  
hear George Clinton, sniff Special K in the driving rain  
and that held more of my interest  
than college applications could claim.  
I made any excuse for going for chocolate or margaritas  
instead of writing poetry.

And Jason's room was cobalt blue and mirrored, I remember;  
we'd think we'd thought profound thoughts passing the book  
on freedom at Fisher's, writing lines, passing joints  
and mirrors, pretending to be international  
spies around the house.  
I was La La Mirror.

Did escaping make it matter more? The score  
was parties (many)  
to tragic deaths (three). Mike lived  
six  
minutes  
after  
plummeting  
drunk  
rolling  
(probably)  
from a third story San Francisco balcony.

Luke the writer left a hole in his head but no note  
letting us know what else had been there.

Todd o.d.'d in an XTC-induced seizure.  
The Dave Mathews Band and God and me  
and Charlie were also there. And Leslie.  
And all our demons. Claire. Zeek.

When Stephen was on house arrest,  
his parties were by far the best. We'd shotgun  
Southpaw outside the Cherokee doing 120  
in a Caddie with a thug named Christian.

My best friend Amy even went to jail with me.  
We made ourselves "funny mummies,"  
wrapped in government t.p. to mess  
with Simpson County P.D. It was fun  
to be too young for laws,  
fun to feel so rock and roll. We started shouting *Prison riot!*  
They fed us muffins;  
we started demanding better gruel.  
We threw spitballs  
at the graffiti on the wall.

But that was too far to go  
to put us in orange  
jumpsuits. We weren't common.  
We had gorgeous smiles.  
We'd knock over a thousand cones for a laugh.  
We'd knock over a thousand cones for a line,  
spend our last dime on a quarter bag of weed upon our release.  
  
A carnie called Apollo controls the lever.

Meanwhile, cough syrup night, oh heaven,  
what we were really waiting for  
was to find our biological lovers,  
poems sometimes, wondering  
what we should do tonight, and  
what could we do?

Bridget could fetch the dryer screen  
and sift down a coke rock.  
Tony could fetch an ink pen  
and empty the cartridge out.  
We could all whisk bliss up.

Before the wheel eroded, corrupted  
us, made me sick, threw me off, and  
Apollo said, *hold up, slow down*,  
*Dionysus threw up*,

there were too many rounds over the apex  
too many times, too much.

A carnie called Apollo controls the lever.

But oh, sometimes I still see  
those poems, those places, those faces  
in halogen lights for miles and miles—  
It feels like my old life,  
only pure.

## **Villanelle after a Setback**

I've seen gypsies dancing and have gasped,  
believing I could leave my human office anytime.  
Occasional miracles are not quite facts.

I've drummed with kings. My laughter made them laugh.  
I shook my tambourine and was invited to the shrine.  
I've seen gypsies dancing and have gasped.

I know about the people in the grass,  
who flit in figure eights up to the moon and never die.  
Occasional miracles are not quite facts.

Fortune-telling cards spread before me like a map,  
show me to the tent where my faith may be revived.  
I've seen gypsies dancing and have gasped.

I believe the magic mirror, but it cracks.  
I see cool blue stones in the valleys of the wild:  
Occasional miracles are not quite facts.

I'm tired of seeking magic acts and fairy craft.  
There is no wine to shrink us down to size.  
I've seen gypsies dancing and have gasped.  
Occasional miracles are not quite facts.

## The Footman's Endeavor

I wanted to write a poem with the sound, look, and taste  
of snowflakes, Marie Antoinette, and cake. I wanted  
to put *French water tastes like cream with you as Queen*  
in it. Like the day she *finds a gift in the forest*. Let  
it be a *glass coffin floating on a lake*. I'd make  
sure it contained *ice can cut rock*  
and *how much milk costs*. The title: *Cold Bed*.  
Perhaps *The Rose Was on the Floor*. I'd leave a trail  
of crumbs that would *drag her downtown in the rain*.  
I thought I'd make it meditative, like *watching green*  
*bananas turn yellow*. Alas, I'm *sad as aging beauties*.  
I'm just a simple fellow. I can't think  
of how the poem should go,  
not *for all the golden tigers in the meadow*.

## Love, Waxing

Listening to your stomach—  
    which sounds  
like a boiling  
    beaker, like  
    rolls  
of thunder, like  
    parting seas—  
  
can easily flood me.

## Two of Cups

The patient angels speak softly in  
sunlight languages, get busy

polishing ruby rings and brass cups. At last  
they can get to work and the birds

pick out the finest silk while the mice  
begin to sew the gypsy bridegroom

a dark blue eternity suit. See how  
my white gown pours my bright love

on the crowd like snow  
upon a fire in old starry heaven.



## Last Night's Drunk Love Letters

You and I beside Florida's ocean,  
we wax, all talk. We try  
to preserve our lovers' prose,  
our cryptic alphabet. Last  
night's drunk love letters  
just continue to haunt.  
On and off and on and off.

I say I love the word "celestial." I shake  
my solitary hell off in the sand.  
I speak of shells pried open, exposing selves raw as muscle.  
How I want to build a castle.  
On and off and on and off.

Your brain is hot as skin: you listen  
when I wax such talk. Such brand new chances that we christen  
when we lie out on the dock.  
The sky begins to walk.

You and I sit beside (*whoosh*)  
Florida's ocean  
The tide is trying to decide (*whoosh*)  
on staying or going.

You tell me sand contains pieces of shells,  
microscopic animals, dead and living,  
sediments, fragments, minerals,  
quartz and granite.  
Granted.

Damnit, you know a lot of facts,  
but you can't bottle them.  
Will you can it?  
You know it all and I can't stand it.  
On and off and on and off.

You think you're my right arm (which chains me to the dock).  
You inform me starfish arms just naturally fall off.  
Just set me free. Fall off. (I'd miss the missing limb.)  
You turn to me and dumbly say, "A new one just grows in."

And as the words descend to small and smaller talk,  
last night's drunk love letters were only written in chalk.

You and I sit beside (*whoosh*)  
Florida's ocean  
The tide is trying to decide (*whoosh*)  
on staying or going.

You pried me open years ago.  
I've felt exposed raw as muscle. I  
gave. I  
gave way. The suds  
licked shapes on the shore.  
The shapes quickly evaporate.

## What Lies Between Us

931 miles.

Your weight in gasoline.

(I toss the strawberries, lock my red doors, lie  
to the houseplants that I'll be back soon.)

I-10 uncoiling like some snake lies between us.

Ten feet above the swamp the blacktop goes rolling out, the yellow  
lines and fourteen hours of thought.

I-55, unrolling like a long black tongue between us.

The rest areas and fields singing out in blacktop and twelve hours  
and bathroom stops.

It's these pencil stabs at art in the Big Easy between us.

It's that recording studio in Chicago between us.

Papermill Road and Elvis Presley Boulevard.

Otis Redding (who's on a mix CD

I made you but I won't say  
a lawyer kissed me to "Try A Little Tenderness").

*What* lies between us?

Metal Museum Drive.

Trucks and truckers and a million wildflowers.

Fish, Horn, and Horseshoe Lakes;

Arkansas (just a slice); Casey's Tackle Shop; and a truck stop  
specializing in pies.

Hundreds of McDonald's, roughly (I'll kill

ten minutes estimating), and a teenaged Marge  
in Jonesboro selling me \$2.50 Red Bull with old hands.

I don't drink rubbish but I forgive her for it. She's thinking  
of her own Jeff or Robert moved off to say, St. Louis.

(You, not quite as intuitive, might think it was the Jonesboro Amoco job  
giving her face the hangdog look.)

Trucks and truckers with horns they know how to use.

One with a sign: "Be a flirt. Lift your skirt or shirt." (I will tell you about this, we will  
laugh.)

I-57 unrolling like an artery into Missouri between us.

Classic rock and country stations  
    (hearing “I’m a little too proud  
    to just keep hangin’ on.” Is that Dwight Yoakam?).

Fort Defiance;  
    up here it’s a lithograph of rural Midwest,  
    and childhood memories of the movie *Footloose*  
    come flooding back and I laugh out of boredom and zone out and seven hours      of  
Illinois and speed limit 65 lies  
    between us.

Hours and hours of Illinois  
    where an existential calmness settles in.  
        I sing my tongue out and all my songs unrolling into corn  
        fields. Here where my third eye begins,  
        all my songs and thoughts and cares unrolling into fields.

## The Heart is Not a Lamp

Try forcing the heart to sit in cold darkness for days,  
deaf, dumb, blind,  
unspeaking, unfeeling, without protest,  
like some dumb lamp whose owner is on holiday.

“I left the heart on when I went away,” says the owner.  
Ah yes, but the heart is not an appliance engineered  
to obey a casual and blasé flick  
of the wrist.  
The heart is not a lamp.

Sure, the heart flickers (sentimental, little arrhythmias)  
like a lamp, wires brittle and frayed,  
but a faulty lamp can be easily fixed.  
Try this: crack the ribs,

that white-bone heart-shade.  
Try to operate. Expect dark stains.  
So the heart and the lamp end up  
in the same place (a landfill

is as good as a grave). Still,  
photons can’t compare to oxygen and  
love. Artificial light is not animate blood.

A lamp is not a drum, not a hub  
with a beat: *lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub*.  
Rub the base of the heart and no genie  
will appear but if one did,

the heart might wish like this:

- 1) the ability to play the melody instead of only drum and bass
- 2) never to be left in cold darkness
- 3) the ability to confess to being a lamp impersonator.

The heart is not a lamp.  
Ah yes, but what a splendid little red actress.

## Personally

“A wish for temporary withdrawal is permitted.”

Juliet Sharman-Burke

The New Complete Book of Tarot

I lived in a small silent town.  
At night, I heard bats  
breathing: that was what  
my loneliness had come to.  
So I climbed this hill to make deals  
with the rain. In my head,  
piano music often plays. Up here  
I read, I sing every single day.  
Sitting revolutions-based on  
the final limbs, I take  
comfort speaking my mind to the wind.  
Lately my phone number is one.  
But I sing, I read, I repeat myself.  
I sleep on my side, on the side  
of a craggy peak. I wake and hold  
my spiritual teachers' books tight  
to my chest. I am planning  
out how tight to hold on  
to my plan  
of standing here  
holding a lantern much longer.

## Vita

Laura “Lane” Miller has published articles, poems, and songs in various magazines and independent films. She grew up in Jackson, Mississippi, and earned a B..A. in English from the University of Southern Mississippi in 2002.